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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

Bennett Weaver

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The Man Who Never Went to College

Abraham Lincoln was born one hundred forty-nine years ago; he died ninety-three years ago (1809-1865).

Up from log cabin to the Capital,
One fire was on his spirit, one resolve -
To send the keen ax to the root of wrong,
Clearing a free way for the feet of God,
The eyes of conscience testing every stroke,
To make his deed the measure of a man.
He built the rail-pile as he built the State,
Pouring his splendid strength through every blow:
The grip that swung the ax in Illinois
Was on the pen that set a people free.

Ninety-three years ago our nation in its grief began to know Lincoln. Since then the world has come to know him. His words have been embedded in the speech of all great nations. When the English soldiers at the Marne died for a cause but dimly understood, England remembered their devotion in the words of Lincoln. In bronze upon the chapel walls of Oxford, near the lists of the dead, are set the sentences from Gettysburg: "that these dead shall not have died in vain." Rich as no other nation in statesmen, she passes in her highest need the words of Pitt and Burke and Gladstone and turns to the words of Lincoln. Outside of Westminster Abbey, that shrine of her noblest dust, Lincoln watches. We cannot claim him all; nor yet can the land from which he drew his blood. John Drinkwater, that Englishman who made Lincoln live again for us, has called him "The World Emancipator." And when he died in the Peterson House across from the Ford Theatre, Stanton spoke the right words: "Now he belongs to the ages."

Here in America we have spent the full genius of speech to burnish the fame of this man. For us, "His soul was like a star, and dwelt apart." Our greatest orators have crowned him with glory. "His shining," says Cadman, "covers every quarter of the firmament." But encomia seem insufficient to serve us. We feel that this man is at last a mystery among us, and far above our poor power to do him reverence. When we are grasping with our greatest strength we yet seem to fail adequately to do him honor.

And this man was Abraham Lincoln, one in whose presence no honest man ever felt embarrassed.

Many great men have left portraits of themselves: Michaelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael, Rembrandt. What prompted them we may not know, but their faces were made to glow with beauty and with power. Not so with Lincoln. We are told that on a street in Springfield a man approached him, drew a pistol and said: "I vowed to God that if ever I met a man homelier than I, I would shoot him." Lincoln looked down at him and replied, "If I am homelier than you are, fire ahead."

At the request of J. W. Fell, a political supporter, Lincoln wrote a rare letter about himself on December 20, 1859. He said, in part: "When I came of age I did not know much. Still, somehow, I could read, write, and cipher to the rule of three, but that was all. I have not been to school since. The little advance I now have upon this store of education I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity. . . I was raised to farm work, which I continued till I was twenty-one.... If any personal description of me is thought desirable, it may be said I am, in height, six feet four inches nearly; lean in flesh, weighing an average of one hundred and eighty pounds; dark complexion, with coarse black hair and grey eyes. No other marks or brands recollected."

There you have Lincoln, with a twinkle in the saddest eyes that have looked on man

since Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

My fellow alumni, there are many pleasant matters about our University which I should enjoy discussing with you. For ours is a great University and I have heard much of the loyalty which you feel for her. It is a loyalty justified in her history, justified in her purposes, justified in her present leadership. But "these are the times that try men's souls"; and here in this land of Lincoln, in this no mean city which he knew I want to think with you about this man who never went to college.

We have, I know, already given Lincoln too much of the mere worship of words. He is not the first man whom we have exalted above ourselves so that we might not expect ourselves to act as he acted. So we not only delude ourselves but dishonor him. "Public opinion has moved in swift, warm, living currents around his memory," cries Cadman, the most lyric orator of our time. But the question is, How much of the living force of his will have been made regnant in public opinion.

I took this question to three citizens: a shoeblack, a working man, a fellow professor. The Shoeblack said: "Oh, he was just another president, I guess." And I thought of the words: "All persons held as slaves within any state shall be thenceforward and forever free."

The Working Man said: "I aint thought much of him." And I recalled the words: "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth."

The Professor said: "I don't know. He was rather a poet, wasn't he?" And these words rang bitterly in my mind: "That these dead shall not have died in vain."

I repeat the question: How much of the living force of his will has been made regnant in public opinion? Do we worship Lincoln? Let us remember then what Montaigne said: "Our true worship is that which we put in use in the place where we chance to be."

Theodore Roosevelt once made a mighty campaign on these words: "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only." And he added - and I recall the words because Lincoln loved them - "Let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."

The greatest sentence which Theodore Roosevelt ever spoke in honor of Lincoln was this: "The men of Mr. Everett's type today revere Lincoln because he is dead, but object to anyone who is alive who follows Lincoln's lead. We today can show our loyalty to Abraham Lincoln, can show that that loyalty is not mere loyalty of lips, but loyalty of the heart, by applying his principles to the living issues of the present; not by confining ourselves to praising them for the way he applied those principles to issues that are dead."

What are these principles? They are simple; they are clear; they are close. 1. Liberty for the individual. 2. Liberty under the Constitution. Liberty under the law. With these principles Lincoln's convictions were directly engaged. Perhaps I should say to you who are university men that his thought about these fundamental truths was downright and without academic qualifications.

Shortly after his son Robert had gone to Harvard Lincoln was heard to muse: "I wish I could have gone to Harvard. Then I should have become a hairsplitter instead of a railsplitter."

No. His mind went directly to work to find where truth is hid; and once he found it, he never let it go. Characteristically, as Merwin Roe says, "He thought everything out for himself." - A little Swedish girl, matriculating at the University of Minnesota, was asked to distinguish between an educated man and an intelligent man. She said: "An educated man gets his tinks from scmbody else. An intelligent man, he makes his own tinks." Lincoln was an intelligent man. When he was riding the circuit in Illinois he often sat up after his associates had gone to bed, lost in thought. While others slept, Abraham Lincoln was

making his own "tinks." That habit and that power may have saved the Union.

And what did he say about liberty? We educated ones, we whose ears have too much been tickled by professorial loquacity, we who have too often been prone to be taught conclusions should note well what he said. Baltimore, April 18, 1864: "The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty With some, the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases With others, the same word may mean to do as they please with other men."

There you have the issue of the Civil War. There you have the issue between Russia and the United States. We educated people have too often taken the meaning of liberty to be self-evident. Not so with Lincoln. With him there is more thinking, better thinking still to be done.

Some years ago the expression "Personal Liberty" was a shibboleth in my own state of Wisconsin. One saw the words pasted on the rear windows of automobiles and on the windows of saloons. One day a devotee of freedom burst through the swinging doors of a place on East Water Street, Milwaukee. He was charged with spirit, and while shaking his fist and crying out that he believed in "Personal Liberty" he struck another man on the nose. The other man promptly knocked him into the gutter, and said: "I'll have you understand that you're personal liberty leaves off right where my nose begins."

We must note carefully the difference between these two. The first thought that liberty was license. The second thought that liberty was respect for the rights of others. Between them, who shall arbitrate? Even Robert Frost, in his playful way is likely to confuse us by saying that you may give him his freedom but that he will take his liberty. How far may one go in taking his liberty? "The world has never had a good definition of the word," says Lincoln.

True freedom is the highest accomplishment of a disciplined soul. At last it is an inner thing, a spiritual thing. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." But what if we do not know the truth? "What is truth?" asked jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. What if we do not know? Then no man can give us freedom.

In the last analysis Lincoln did not free the negroes; he merely gave them what he could of a chance to free themselves. Inside its own agony and by its own courage and intelligence that people must work out its own emancipation. And so for all of us.

We Americans must learn to put less stress upon personal liberty and the pursuit of happiness and more stress upon doing our duty. That is the teaching alike of the Father of our Country and the Great Emancipator. Said Washington in his first inaugural, "It has been my faithful study to collect my duty." Said Lincoln, as he closed his Cooper Institute address: "Let us stand by our duty fearlessly and effectively.... Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty."

Man's liberty lies in his duty done.

And, if we follow Lincoln, it lies in humility. I want to read you a description of Lincoln's entering Richmond on the day after it fell. "The walk was long, and the President halted a moment to rest. 'May de good Lord bless you, President Linkum!' said an old negro, removing his hat and bowing, with tears of joy rolling down his cheeks. The President removed his own hat, and bowed in silence; but it was a bow which upset. . . the ceremonies of centuries."

I tell you of this incident because I want to ask you a question: Which of these two, the old negro or Lincoln, was the more free?

Somewhat later, as Billy Graham tells us, "A Negro entered a fashionable church in

Richmond. . . while communion was being served. He walked down the aisle and knelt at the altar. A rustle of shock and anger swept through the congregation. Sensing the situation, a distinguished layman immediately stood up, stepped forward to the altar and knelt beside his colored brother The layman was Robert E. Lee."

I tell you this incident because I want to ask you a question: Which of these two, the negro or Lee, was the more free?

Liberty under the Constitution. Liberty under the Law. - Long ago, in Athens, Plato taught that Democracy is the best form of bad government. Aristotle, after studying 158 constitutions, pointed out the tendency of a democracy to degenerate into a tyranny. Washington saw that our form of government could lead to "most horrid enormities" and "frightful despotism" as men sought security "in the absolute power of an individual." In our own day we have had a president who exercised his veto powers 631 times.

Yet Lincoln held firmly that under the Constitution, under the law individual liberty can exist. In fact, he held that otherwise it cannot exist. It is only as these United States are preserved in their integrity that there can be liberty for men. Almost repeating the words of Washington he asserted that this government meant "hope to all the world for all future time." These words he spoke at Independence Hall on February 22, 1861; and he added: "I would rather be assassinated on this spot than surrender it (this hope).... I have said nothing but what I am willing to live by, and, if it be the pleasure of Almighty God, to die by."

Not long ago I stood in the place where Lincoln spoke these words. Presently the voice of the guard came through my meditation. "There," he said, "under that chandelier they put the body of Lincoln."

There are two more matters upon which I want to bring you the thinking of this non-college man. First, the problem of restricting the power of government. Second, the fitness of the people to run their own affairs.

First: speaking in Chicago on July 10, 1858 Lincoln laid down this principle: "The general government has no right to interfere with anything other than the general class of things that concern the whole." Later, in his first message to Congress (July 4, 1861) he said: "Whatever concerns the whole should be confided to the whole;...whatever concerns only the State should be left exclusively to the State." But in that same message he posed a question which should give us pause: "Must a government of necessity be too strong for the liberties of its own people or too weak to maintain its own existence?" And whereas on February 15, 1861 Lincoln said at Pittsburg, "My political education strongly inclines me against a very free use of any of the means of the executive to control the legislation of the country," on November 10, 1864 he fatefully said: "It has long been a grave question whether any government not too strong for the liberties of its people can be strong enough to maintain itself in a great emergency."

"A great emergency" - In his war message Lincoln called for 400,000 men and \$400,000,000. Today "the troubles of our proud and angry dust" cover the earth and begin to haunt space and infinitude.

We must think! It may be as Woodrow Wilson said: "The history of liberty is the history of the limitations in the power of government." It may be. But the grave question of Lincoln remains unanswered, and it shall not be answered except it be answered in sweat or except it be answered in tears.

Second: the fitness of the people to rule. - Speaking on July 10, 1858 Lincoln said: "We are now a great nation; we are thirty, or about thirty million of people." Now, one hundred years later, we still say, "We are a great nation," but our people are nearly six times as many as they were.

In his day Lincoln pointed to four racial stocks upon which rested our strength. Today, according to Louis Adamic, our people have "over fifty different national backgrounds." In his day Lincoln noted that perhaps not half the people were descendants of the founding fathers. Today, Adamic says that the descendants of immigrants "constitute about half the white population. Most of this half is not Anglo-Saxon." Among these people there are "one thousand newspapers and magazines published in forty foreign languages and about one thousand radio programs daily in languages other than English."

That you may not misunderstand me let me remind you that Louis Adamic was himself an immigrant and that he had a passionate faith in the goodness of all these people. I am, as Lincoln said to the Legislature at Indianapolis on February 13, 1861 "not asserting anything; I am merely asking questions for you to consider." Surely one of the questions we must ask in this: Do not the words, "Government of the people, by the people, and for the people" carry in them a deep and solemn perplexity? Are they not portentous?

Of this I am sure: We shall never solve our problems merely by voting Republican or by voting Democrat. We must make up our minds to the truth of what Aristotle said: "Only the good man can be the good citizen." We must make up our minds to the truth of what Washington said: "The foundations of our national policy shall be laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality."

May I conclude by quoting from a great American who was a good Republican but who was caught attending a Democratic convention? I quote from the Boston Globe. - "Once, when opening a Democratic state convention in Missouri, James A Reed discovered that there was no clergyman present. In the press box, however, he spied William Allen White. Reed called upon White to deliver the invocation. Mr. White rose and said: 'I am in no mood to invoke the blessing of the Lord upon this meeting. As a matter of fact, I prefer that the Lord doesn't even know I am here!.'"

At another time White said: "This country is in the most dangerous situation it has been since the adoption of the constitution.... But if there is anything wrong with this country - and there is - the fault is with the people. This country is suffering because of the mental, spiritual, and moral laziness of the American people, and for no other reason...."

We made our bed and we are now sleeping in it, or at least trying, while the bedbugs of fate are nipping us and sucking our life blood. The Republicans are yelling their heads off about bureaucracy and high taxes--trying to blame the bedbugs for functioning as nature intended they should.

It isn't the bedbugs that are wrong. It is we."

Yet over this nation still broods the spirit of Lincoln. Whatever our failures, he points to duty, and bids us on. For us he sets an example of a mind disciplined; and like the Father of our Country, who was not a college man, Lincoln, who was not a college man, bids us think long, think well.

And in all he bids us be strong and of good courage, taking our place in the world humbly, but holding our spirits strong under the control of eternal law.

Now I close with words from his Farewell Address at Springfield, February 11, 1861: "I now leave, not knowing when or whether ever I shall return.... Trusting in Him, who can go with me and remain with you, and be everywhere for good, let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell."

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Bennett Weaver



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